1 OF 1
ED
069 947

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 069 947 AC 012 971

AUTHOR Niemi, John A.
TITLE Communicating With the So-Called Disadvantaged -- Can We Find a Common Ground?
PUB DATE [72]
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Educators; Attitudes; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cultural Differences; Disadvantaged Groups; Environmental Influences; Problem Solving; *Program Planning; Values

ABSTRACT

Focus on some of the problems of culturally different groups is the purpose of this paper; also, some implications are drawn for the adult educator. These problems are basically problems of communication caused by the apartness of these groups from the dominant society. The communication process is defined as involving an exchange of meaning between the sender (Encoder) of a message and the receiver (Decoder). In three studies, researchers set out to identify personality traits common to culturally different groups and to describe relationships between them and the dominant society. Bases of difference include different value systems and attitudes springing from social, economic and other forces operating in the environment. Other impediments to communication arise from differences in language. Some implications of these communication problems for the adult educator are: (1) The adult educator must involve these groups in the program planning process; (2) He must learn to respect the difference in language; and (3) The adult educator must enlist the aid of sophisticated members of the different groups in the planning process of any program. (CK)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

ED 069947

COMMUNICATING WITH THE SO-CALLED DISADVANTAGED--CAN WE FIND A COMMON GROUND?

John A. Niemi

The term "disadvantaged" is frequently chosen to describe individuals or groups sharing certain socio-economic and social-psychological characteristics. The former include low incomes, limited education and limited job opportunities; the latter include close kinship and neighborhood ties and a "live for today" philosophy. However, the term "disadvantaged" and the concept it introduces have acquired pejorative connotations, setting individuals or groups apart as somehow inferior. For this reason, the term "culturally different" will be used with respect to poverty sub-cultures found in our North American society. Here, "culture" has its traditional meaning, referring to groups of people who share distinctive designs for living.[1,2] This group embraces both the rural poor and the urban poor. In the first category are individuals or families living on marginal land and Indians on reservations; in the second category are the rural poor who have migrated to the city and who often live in ghettos, and other ghetto-dwellers like new immigrants, "old" immigrants who have never learned to speak English or French, and minority races like Indians and negroes.

The obvious "apartness" of these culturally different groups from the dominant society is bound to cause problems of communication between them. In this paper, it will be my purpose to focus on some of those problems, and then to draw some implications for the adult educator. Hopefully, in doing so, it will be possible to find some common ground

AC012971

Dr. John A. Niemi is Associate Professor of Adult Education at the University of British Columbia.

on which to meet.

First, let us look at another concept, "communication," which has its root in the Latin "communis," meaning "common." Fundamentally, the communication process involves an exchange of meaning between the sender (Encoder) of a message and the receiver (Decoder). This process does not, of course, refer to verbal transmissions alone, but includes non-verbal transmissions which may or may not be intentional, e.g., facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice. Schramm's model is pertinent here -- his Sender-Encoder-Signal-Decoder-Receiver pattern, with its dependence upon intersecting fields of experience.[3] In fact, the points of intersection, as the concept is applied to the dominant society and the culturally different groups, may be extremely limited. Hence, it seems more appropriate and more realistic to talk about different "cultural milieus." This term hints at perhaps the most important barrier to communication between these groups and the dominant society--the very different perceptions entertained of reality and the stereotypes and assumptions that ensue on both sides. An illustration appears in this comment by a Mississippi black man in talking with Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles:

> The people who help us, we're grateful to them, but I wish they wouldn't keep telling us how sorry they are for us, how bad we have it. And I wish their eyes wouldn't pop out every time they see we're not crying all day long and running wild or something. The other day a white fellow, he said how wonderful my house is, and how good we get along together, and how impressed he was by it all. I wanted to say, "Don't be giving us that kind of compliment, because it shows on you what you don't know about us."[4]

Notice how negative is the perception of the white man, and how deeply the negro resents the interpretation placed upon his life-style.

The research conducted by Skene, Derbyshire and Rogers supplies another illustration. In three separate studies, these researchers set out to identify personality traits common to culturally different groups and to describe relationships between them and the dominant society. Almost all traits listed in the studies are negative; these people are said to be boisterous, physically aggressive, reticent, fatalistic, suspicious, etc.[5] In studying the findings, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that they mirror the researchers' own biases arising from their particular perceptions of reality. Likewise, an account by Johnie Scott, the first negro from Watts to attend Harvard, reveals the different "realities" arising from different cultural milieus and the resulting conflicts and communication problems. After his failure at Harvard and his return to Watts, he wrote:

> Watts appeared very strange to me when I returned. And yet, as I walked through the projects, as I went by old houses, on the back streets, and as I described my Harvard experiences to my friends, I again became aware of the tremendous spiritual toll the ghetto exacts. I could now feel the hopelessness. I, in failing Harvard, had been ripped asunder from all my retreats from poverty, and for once I had to stand naked before my own fear. . . before the leering face of myself, an old man perched on a milk crate cackling at the young ladies.[6]

Finally, there is the study conducted at Mounds, Illinois, by Byuarm, who reports the failure of a community action program designed to bring negroes and whites together to discuss racial issues. Whereas the design of the study called for interaction between the races on an equal basis, a superordinate-subordinate relationship persisted, with the negroes assuming the lesser role. The cleavage made it impossible for informal channels of communication to operate or for formal channels to open up for exchanges of opinion and information on racial issues.[7]

What are the bases of the different perceptions of reality? Some have already been hinted at--different value systems and attitudes springing from social, economic and other forces operating in the environment. Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult presents many studies that substantiate these relationships. Although the diversity of the groups makes it difficult to generalize, it has been found that many uphold value systems that are clearly at variance with those of the dominant society. Because they see no future that differs significantly from the present, these groups tend to be pragmatic and to lean toward "present" orientation or rewards, whereas the dominant society leans toward future orientation. Also, as a response to discrimination by the dominant society, many groups reject, explicitly or implicitly, its institutional structures in favor of "small personal kinship, locality or friendship groups."[8]

Other impediments to communication arise from differences in language; the most obvious involves the non-English-speaking members of culturally different groups. And even where such persons have attempted to learn English, there exist "interferences" coming from their native language. It was found, for example, among a group of Finnish-Canadians, that many had evolved a "slang" which is a curious combination of English sounds approached through Finnish rules of pronunciation. "Finglish," as it is known in the United States, produces such words as "hospitalli" for "hospital" and "cooperativii" for "co-operative."[9] In addition, there are language problems attributable to regional or local dialects, as exemplified by certain expressions found to be common in Appalachia: a bein (being able); out he goes a playin (go out and play); shes fixin (while she fixed).[10]

Another communication problem relates to the large group commonly called the "hard core poor." Their language, like other languages, has at times been maligned by the dominant society as inferior, sub-standard, etc. But such appellations overlook the value of the language within the group itself. There, it is a viable form of communication, described by Bernstein as having "a simplicity and directness of expression, emotionally virile, pithy, and powerful, with a metaphoric range of considerable force and appropriateness."[11] The language serves admirably the needs of the group for an obvious reason--Encoder and Decoder share the same cultural milieu. But, outside that milieu, and especially in the context of the dominant society, the language of the hard-core poor may suffer severe limitations. Notably, verbal facility is restricted, a condition which often causes these people to rely significantly on non-verbal cues in both giving and receiving messages. Thus, when messages are received from the dominant society, the hard-core poor will often pay more attention to actions than to words. As for the giving of language, a study conducted at the University of Pittsburgh implies that certain features of the language used by this group render it almost incomprehensible to persons outside.[12] To complicate the situation so far as communication is concerned, there is evidence that the language is sometimes deliberately contrived "to keep the outsider out."[13]

What are some of the difficulties? An important one is that the language is "a predominantly descriptive mode of abstraction, rather than an analytic one. . . ." and

> Meanings are embedded in local and time-bound settings. The meanings depend, for full understanding, on the authority and other social relationships of the communicants, as well as on their ages, sexes, and other personal characteristics, on the time and place in which they are spoken. . . .[14]

Moreover, many distinctive words have been formed by various means becoming idioms not easily grasped by outsiders, for example,

> Agentive Substitution. . . produced by substituting typical actions or functions of an actor for the actor himself, by the addition of -er (baby--crumb crusher, pea pusher; door--slammer; tooth brush--pearl pusher. . .
>
> The use of words such as "job" and "man" as suffices to construct new selections (e.g., crying--kleenex job; hair--comb job, grease job; outwitted--tank job. . .; social worker--job man; neighborhood leader-- man man; most respected or knowledgeable person--down man. . .
>
> Resultative Appelations -- This group of words is produced by selecting an extreme result as a substitute for its cause (e.g., angry--smoking; fight with a gun--blast; fight with a sharp instrument--bleed. . .[15]

What are some implications of these communication problems for the adult educator who plans programs for culturally different groups? If he wants such programs to succeed, he must realize that his own background and training are likely to give him different perceptions of reality from those of the adult learners. He could unwittingly look at their situation through the lens of his own middle class biases and assumptions and so misjudge their needs and expectations. To help avoid this pitfall, it is essential that the adult educator involve the groups fully in the program planning process. Otherwise, he risks failure. Many programs have foundered in the past, because they have been based on the needs of the groups as perceived not by them but by persons in the dominant society. These needs have traditionally found expression in programs based on minimal skills in reading, writing, and computation, instead of any larger configurations offering choices from a wide array of life-styles.

One strategy that has been successfully employed to determine the needs of culturally different groups is film or the VTR to facilitate dialogue within a community. Its members can, by this means, not only discern their problems more clearly but take a direct hand in seeking creative solutions. A good example is the project launched by the St. Jacques Citizens' Committee of Montreal. It is reported that

> They went out into the streets and interviewed the people about their problems, in order to learn more about the neighborhood and to make people think about what could be done. Then an edited half-hour tape was used to analyze discussion at the beginning of a series of public meetings. The procedure was very effective; people plunged into the heart of the discussion, instead of being fearful about expressing themselves. The citizens also learned a lot about themselves by viewing themselves in action during meetings and discussions.[16]

The approach is similar to that advocated by Paulo Friere, whose concept of "conscientization" seems to me to represent what we often call "involvement" at its best:

> . . . the process in which men, not as recipients, act as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.[17]

Another implication arises from the immensely complicated nature of the language of the groups. The adult educator will err if he thinks that these languages are simple and easily mastered, because the people generally have a low level of education; or if he regards these languages as inferior and crude. Rather, he must respect them for their qualities of utility and force and even learn, if he can, to understand them. Such understanding of a man's language is a valuable key to a man's needs and hopes. At the same time, the perceptive adult educator will recognize the dilemma of individuals or groups who have only one language available to them. They lack the options of better educated persons who shift easily from patterns of colloquial

language to more formal patterns as the occasion demands. The task, then, is one of educating members of the culturally different groups in the perception and use of the available options, in order to improve communication between them and the dominant society.

A third implication relates to the adult educator's strategy in making contact with the groups. Because of the often closed nature of these groups, he should probably not attempt, as a general rule, to make head-on contact with them. Rather, as the University of Pittsburgh study put it, he ought to seek out "sophisticated, knowledgeable insiders" to assist him.[18] The use of insiders would be helpful at all stages of a program--planning, promotion, operation, and evaluation--to help overcome misunderstandings that go beyond the skill of the adult educator. He would be well advised, also, to consider employing para-professionals or professionals drawn from the groups. In Alaska, for example, sponsors from the native community often become A.B.E. teachers, although they possess only a high school education. The obvious advantage is that these teachers actively share the "reality" of the people whom the adult educator wants to reach and so perceive the problems better than he could.

Other implications of the communication problems that have been discussed may be useful to the adult educator who occupies the role of the teacher. A special implication for the A.B.E. teacher relates to the teacher-learner transaction. He should have empathy with his students, including patience with their fears and a sincere regard for their value systems and modes of communication. In particular, he must be aware of the sensitivity of the learners to non-verbal cues and not betray shock or disapproval by facial expression or bodily

movements. At least one research study has shown that teachers who appeared successful were those who could set aside their own value systems and accept the adult learner as a human being of considerable potential.[19] Additionally, the teacher should seek assistance from linguists when dealing with adult learners whose native language differs from that of the dominant society. Here, a contrastive analysis of the two languages, showing their similarities and differences relating to such things as vowel sounds, consonant sounds, and syntax should prove useful.

Concerning materials, the teacher should recognize the limitations of standardized or packaged items in the form of books or programs developed for radio or television. Such materials seldom meet the special needs of the learner, but tend to restrict him by imposing on him a "reality" not his own and in language that he does not understand. However, some materials could be usefully adapted by the teacher and certainly they could furnish him with ideas for developing materials of his own. Attention must also be given to using a variety of techniques to foster one-way and two-way communication between teacher and student and between student and student, so that all act as both Encoders and Decoders. Such techniques include lectures, discussion, role-playing, and field trips. A happy by-product of this approach would be the creation of an open threat-free classroom climate in which each one would feel free to express his needs, his anxieties, and his expectations.

In using television and film, the A.B.E. teacher must not automatically assume that his students will learn readily from these media. It is a mistake to think that persons having low verbal

facility will necessarily demonstrate a high degree of visual literacy. What is meant by this concept? Briefly, it means the ability to "discriminate and interpret the visual actions, objects and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment."[20] Such skills include seeing relationships among ideas or events, whether these are presented in sequence or in flashback; discerning intricate relationships among characters; sorting out the multiple meanings contained in a visual message; distinguishing truth from falsity, especially in advertisements and political messages; perceiving implicit as well as explicit assumptions and value systems; and so on.

I began this paper by announcing that I would focus attention on some communication problems affecting culturally different groups in their relations with the dominant society and explore certain implications for the adult educator. The paper is by no means comprehensive, but it does perhaps highlight a few of his more pressing concerns. In closing, I can hardly do better than quote from Arkava's Sociology for Impoverished Life Styles:

> The general communications . . . approach is one that is based on the underlying assumption that confusion exists between individuals and social systems because they are not effectively communicating. The idea is that if people can see more correctly, communicate more adequately, and reason more effectively, they will be able to lay a realistic common basis for action and changing.[21]

REFERENCES

1. Benn H. Bagdikian. In the Midst of Plenty: A New Report on the Poor in America. Baltimore, 1966, p.49.

2. Oscar Lewis. "The Culture of Poverty." The Scientific American, October 1966, p.19.

3. Wilbur Schramm. "Procedures and Effects of Mass Communication," In Nelson B. Henry, ed. Mass Media and Education. Chicago, Illinois: NSSE, 1954, pp. 113-120.

4. "Breaking the American Stereotypes." Time, February 14, 1972, p.48.

5. Darrell Anderson and John A. Niemi. Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education, 1970, pp. 21-22.

6. Johnie Scott. "How It Is--My Home Is Watts." Harper's Magazine, October 1966, p. 48.

7. S. W. Byuarm. "Community Action: A Case Study in Racial Cleavage. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1962, pp. 58-60.

8. Anderson and Niemi, op cit, pp. 29-30.

9. John A. Niemi. "English for 'Old Canadians': The Finnish Project in British Columbia." Accepted for publication in English Quarterly, Fall, 1972.

10. A. Husain Qazilbash. "A Dialect Survey of the Appalachian Region." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1971, pp. 313-359.

11. Basil Bernstein. "Social Class and Linguistic Development: A Theory of Social Learning." In A.H. Halsey, Jean Floud and C. Arnold Anderson, eds., Education, Economy and Society, 1961, p. 308.

12. Anderson and Niemi, op. cit., p. 27.

13. Rosalie Cohen, et al. "Implications for Culture Conflict from a Semantic Feature Analysis of the Lexicon of the Hard-Core." Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center, Mimeo paper, 1967, p. 2.

14. Ibid, pp. 5-6.

15. Ibid, Appendix, pp. 1-2.

16. Dorothy Todd Henaut. "The Media: Powerful Catalyst for Community Change." In John A. Niemi, ed. Mass Media and Adult Education. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications, 1971, pp. 114-115.

17. Paulo Freire. "Cultural Action and Conscientization." Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 40, No. 3, August 1970. p. 452.

18. Cohen, op. cit., p.4.

19. Robert F. Barnes and Andrew Hendrickson. A Review of Appraisal of Literacy Materials and Programs. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State Research Foundation, 1965, p. 95.

20. John L. Debes. "The Loom of Visual Literacy--An Overview." In Clarence M. Williams and John L. Debes, eds., Proceedings of the First National Conference on Visual Literacy. New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1970, p. 14.

21. Morton L. Arkava. A Sociology of Impoverished Life Styles. Boulder, Colorado; Region VIII, Adult Basic Education Project at the University of Colorado, 1970, p. 74.

ERIC Clearinghouse
NOV 27 1972
on Adult Education